

# State

The Newsletter

United States Department of State

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## **EMBASSY MONROVIA: *Marines to the Rescue***

# Life in the Foreign Service



## Meanwhile, one continent away ... in Africa ...

*Another war, in Liberia, makes life hazardous for embassy people*

BY DR. RICHARD A. BIENIA  
*Regional medical officer*

EACH OF US serving at Embassy Monrovia have known that the violence in Liberia would touch our lives, but none of us realized just how terrible it would be,



Dr. Bienia

nor the full extent of the tragedy. What began as an incursion into Liberia on Christmas Eve in 1989 by a small band of rebels quickly escalated into a full-scale civil war. Led by a flamboyant figure named Charles Taylor, the guerrillas marched toward the capital with the announced purpose of ousting Samuel Doe, who himself had seized power in a bloody coup in this nation on the coast of Africa's western bulge.

Marine observation post at entrance to embassy compound.



As a precautionary measure, the U.S. Government began to urge American citizens to depart—and we eventually achieved the dubious distinction of setting a new record for the greatest number of persons transported to safety by the U.S. Government. Under the direction of chargé d'affaires Dennis Jett (who later received the Distinguished Honor Award) and regional consular officer Penny McMurtry (who shared the title of "Consular Officer of the Year"), we turned out in full force at the embassy to ensure that the evacuation went smoothly and efficiently. In addition to the thousands of private American citizens who left Liberia, all U.S. Government dependents and nonessential embassy staff went as well.

One consequence was that Embassy Monrovia, which had been the largest post in sub-Saharan Africa, dwindled to a few dozen employees. The evacuation also brought home the reality of just how dangerous the situation might become. Those who stayed reduced classified materials, and large amounts of records were sent to

safehaven. Regional security officer Larry Hartnett (who later was chosen "Security Officer of the Year") ensured that security was bolstered in all areas. In addition, it was decided in Washington to position a six-vessel U.S. naval joint task force, designated "Sharp Edge," off the horizon, in the event that security deteriorated in the Monrovia area to such an extent that additional evacuations would be required.

By June, the rebels were proceeding to surround the city. The international airport

### **'Tension escalated as horrible atrocities were committed'**

closed as the guerrillas advanced, and commercial air travel and mail delivery ceased. Water, electricity and telecommunications were cut off. Businesses closed, as did hospitals and other public services. Tension escalated as horrible atrocities were committed against the civilian population. The embassy turned into a bunker. It became impossible to travel outside the immediate



Ed Saimders, George McCumber and Peter Van Lanen putting the mail through.



Marine detachment leader Tim Love (left) with newly-arrived Marine driver of a fast attack vehicle.



Marines unload fast attack vehicles on embassy basketball court.

area of the compound, on Mamba Point.

Meanwhile, President Doe repeatedly declined offers by Ambassador Peter Jon de Vos, who had arrived only a few weeks earlier, to transport him out of the country. The siege of Monrovia began in earnest, and the embassy was completely isolated in

### ***At the embassy: 'Helmets, flak jackets to everyone'***

the midst of a battle reminiscent of Beirut. While we weren't a direct target, stray rounds constantly whistled overhead, at times smashing into a wall or shattering a window. Mr. Hartnett and his assistant, Peter Van Lanan, issued helmets and flak jackets to everyone.

Suddenly, a third force emerged—a breakaway rebel group led by Prince Johnson, a former Taylor lieutenant, who fought his way into the capital from the west. The mayhem intensified as the three factions engaged in slaughter and destruction. Parts of the city were set afire. Non-belligerents cowered in horror, with virtually no chance to escape.

Life for us in the embassy compound toughened dramatically as conditions deteriorated. But thanks to the foresight of



Visiting from Washington, Liberia task force director *Don Petterson* (kneeling), with Ambassador *Peter Jon de Vos*, examine damage at USIA office.

administrative counselor Mike Adams and his superb staff, including general services officer John Caruso and Sally Walker, we were able to overcome obstacles. Food was rationed, with supplies augmented from apartments vacated by evacuees. Our recreation hall still was able to provide tasty spe-

cials each day, thanks in large part to administrative officer Kathy Hodai's personal attention. Budget officer Don Sullivan rigged up an innovative system to catch rainwater from the roofs of embassy buildings, and we got not only drinking water but also occasional "showers" from cups of cold water. Electricity was also rationed as the backup generators failed. However, the greatest blow to our morale wasn't conditions on the ground, but rather our inability to communicate with loved ones back in the



Navy helicopter lands near embassy at Mamba Point.

States—no pouch, no telephone, no ham radio.

Still, it was my observation that the entire staff approached their jobs with dedication, professionalism and good humor, each person in my opinion representing the very best of the Foreign Service. Boredom was no problem despite work schedules of only 16 to 20 hours. The Marine guards, led by Sergeant Tim Love, organized a "Laugh Olympics" to vary the routine. I transformed my home into a "MASH" unit, and I arranged a well-attended "Clint Eastwood Film Festival," tapping my extensive videotape collection. Other events included a tennis tournament, sometimes interrupted by artillery thunder, and a ritual Friday night poker game where Mother Luck shared her favors with all the players. Some staff even fished in the pounding surf beneath Mamba Point, but in these endeavors Mother Luck was elsewhere.

By early August, Monrovia was a shambles. The population bordered on starvation. Outbreaks of cholera were common.

U.S. facilities outside the vicinity of Mamba Point were badly damaged or totally destroyed. AID, USIA, telecommunications installations and a new general services complex all fell victim to the havoc.

Then Prince Johnson threatened to take foreign hostages. To preempt any Americans being harmed, U.S. Marines were ordered ashore to defend the embassy compound and to evacuate several dozen American staff who had been safely ensconced at two regional communications facilities outside the city. In an impeccable operation, hundreds of Marines disembarked from helicopters on the former basketball court.



Ambassador *Peter Jon de Vos* talks to rebel leader *Prince Johnson* (in truck).



Public affairs officer *David Kaecke* takes on domestic chores in absence of the Foreign Service national staff.



Marines arrive to defend the embassy compound.



Embassy staff members evacuating on Navy helicopter, left to right: Marine *Bob Land-*

*herr*, political secretary *Pat McCumber*, communicator *George McCumber*.



Diplomatic Security agents (left to right) *Tony Hicks, Mike Zepan and Bill Mellott*, who helped to distribute helmets and flair guns.

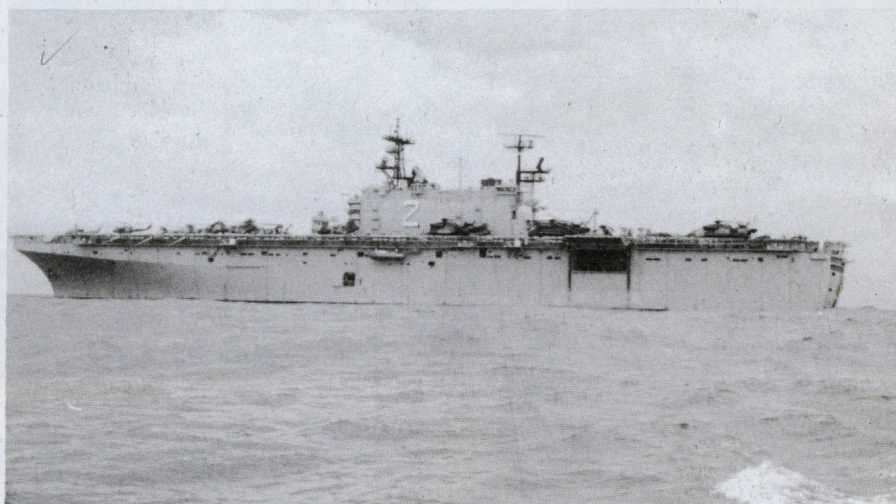
Mortar batteries were installed at strategic locations, and the Marines set up mess and sleeping arrangements wherever they could find space.

The newcomers immediately integrated with the embassy staff, and a new, enlarged country team was born. The U.S. military opened a new link to the outside, providing a logistical chain that facilitated embassy operations, but life was still difficult. Food

***'(We) treated all the Marines to a special dinner as a token of our appreciation'***

supplies improved, and the recreation hall treated all the Marines to a special dinner as a token of the embassy's appreciation.

As the battle raged endlessly, front office secretary Darlene Mann converted



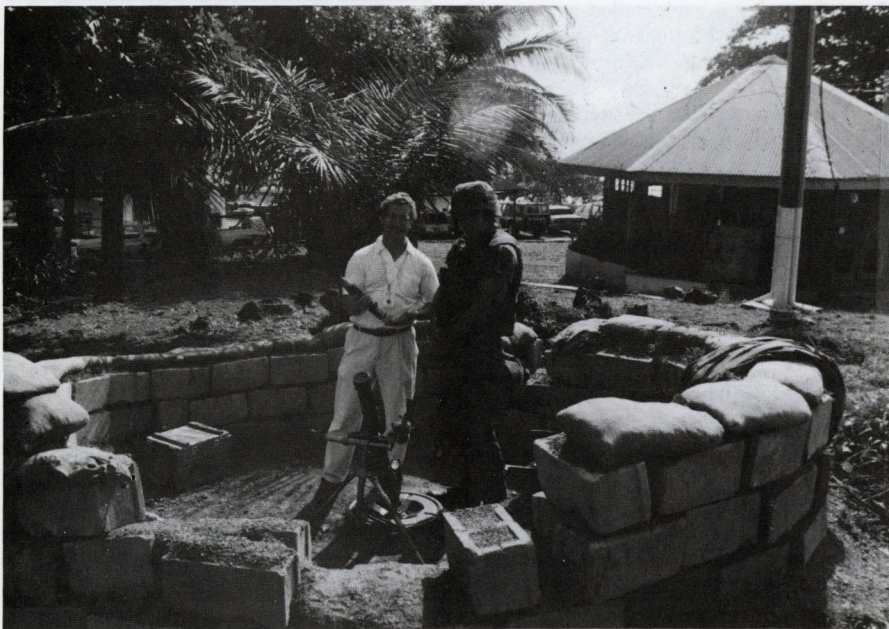
The *Saipan*, mother ship for the Marine helicopters, off shore near Monrovia.



Liberian civilians seek refuge from the fighting outside the embassy compound.



Marines assist civilians during evacuation.



Secretary *Wally Wyatt* with an unidentified Marine gunner.



Ambassador's secretary *Darlene Mann* consults with friend *Chica*.



Ambassador *Peter Jon de Vos* with rebel leader *Prince Johnson* at embassy steps.



Street vendors, undaunted by the firing, set up store outside the embassy to sell trinkets

to evacuees from this troubled country that has old ties to the United States.



Ambassador Peter Jon de Vos, left, welcomes Marine commander, General "Granny" Amus.

her penthouse apartment into a forward observation post that was used by temporary-duty security agents to track the course of the war. With firefights taking place at the embassy's very doorstep, furniture and metal safes were moved against the windows to guard against incoming rounds. When there was insufficient furniture, cases of M.R.E.s (meals ready to eat) were stacked there for protection. Under the supervision of the newly-arrived regional consular officer, E. J. Fischer, and with the help of the Marines, more than 2,500 additional persons, mostly foreign nationals desperate to leave the country, were evacuated by U.S. helicopters to safety in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Governments around the world acclaimed this rescue of their people.

Meanwhile, the Economic Community of West African States established a military force to intervene in Liberia. After a

**'Furniture, metal safes were moved against the windows to guard against (barrages)'**

bloody arrival in late August, the force gradually separated the warring parties, pushing the Taylor and Johnson forces out of Monrovia, and paving the way for an interim government of national unity in late November.

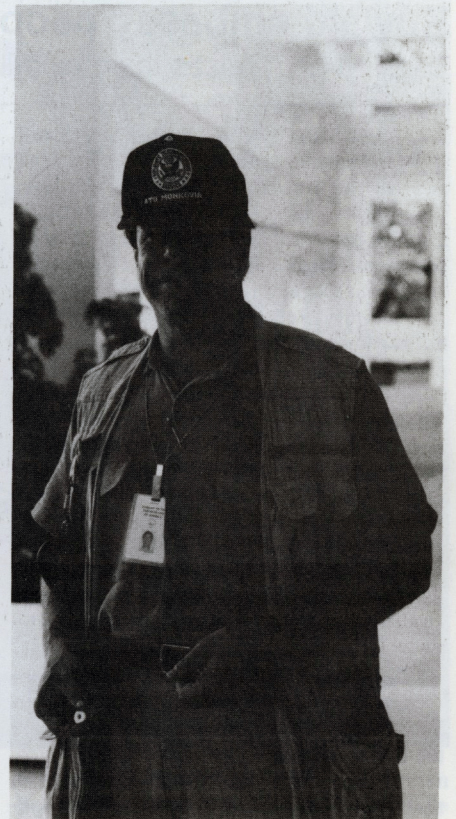
As 1990 drew to a close, an uneasy truce had settled upon the city. The



Bullet hole in the embassy reception window.

atmosphere continued to be tense because of the deep ethnic hatreds that were unleashed and the widespread desire for revenge. Perhaps half of the population of Liberia was homeless or had fled to safety in neighboring Guinea, Sierra Leone and the Côte d'Ivoire.

But as it had throughout the conflict, the American embassy remains open. It was the only foreign mission to function the entire time. It has continued to be a full-service mission, giving partial support to other posts in the region. And we have been critical to facilitating the quick start-up of emergency relief efforts. Economic coun-



Visiting AID officer Joe Gettier.

selor Tom White (who received the Distinguished Honor Award) and our new economic officer, Doug Dearborn, led in this tremendous task. Secretary Baker has commended the embassy staff for the excellence of our reporting, most of which was coordinated by political counselor Bob Porter and political officer Roy Wharton.

Marines still guard the embassy compound. Helicopters still land and take off from the basketball court. But the drama of the July-October siege of Monrovia has been giving way to a more predictable daily routine.

If there have been few headlines about the terrible ordeal in Liberia (foreign journalists simply couldn't travel to Monrovia during much of the war), there still has been understanding and appreciation for just how well the embassy has served the interests of the United States. Testifying before the Africa subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Assistant Secretary Herman J. Cohen summed up with a tribute to the "men and women who lived through days that were frequently dangerous, usually tense and always very, very uncomfortable." ■